

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Invisible Rainbow: Notes for Educators and Librarians

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PHOTO BY PETER HERSHEY

Growing up and feeling like you don't fit in is a common enough experience, and for LGBTQ youth, sometimes benign neglect is the best one can hope for. Even though there remains no federal employment protection or housing discrimination protection, recent modest gains for the LGBTQ community at large seem to be resulting in pushback this summer of 2018 against one of the community's most vulnerable members: youth.

First in June, a law was proposed in Ohio that would force teachers (and presumably librarians) to "out" transgender students. While it's not likely to gain momentum, this proposal targets LGBTQ kids for outing. At a basic level this issue falls in direct opposition to the core values of librarians, who are professionally bound to protect patron privacy, and teachers, who are professionally bound to make "a constructive effort to protect the student from conditions detrimental to learning, health, or safety" (AAE). At a human level, such a proposal jeopardizes the safety of at-risk youth, especially considered in light of the reality that roughly 40% of the homeless youth served in organizations identify as members of the LGBTQ community. Then, in August, the Washington county Utah library district banned LGBTQ displays, and while it's getting a lot of attention, this library isn't alone in the fight to erase LGBTQ identity. Utah eventually opted for a "libraries are for everyone" display instead. While there is nothing wrong with the notion that "libraries are for everyone," this potentially erases LGBTQ identity, history, and reality.

These incidents contradict two core values of the ALA, specifically privacy and diversity. At a time when hate group membership continues to climb across the U.S., people (like librarians and educators) who can safely speak up for inclusion are desperately needed, because here's the thing, LGBTQ people exist. We existed as youth a generation ago, when we hardly ever found ourselves reflected in library displays, books, or media (and still managed to grow up queer). Neither outing or ignoring LGBTQ youth will make them go away, but silence and inaction may make them suffer. If a librarian works in a district that seems hostile to LGBTQ inclusion, here are six strategies to consider that may help keep your library from erasing the rainbow.

1. *Make Diversity a Starting Point:* Imagine what the bookshelves would be like without LGBTQ authors like Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Rita Mae Brown, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, and so many others— those are some of the most celebrated and popular authors on the library shelves! Consider diversity as a starting point rather than an add on, and always include work by LGBTQ authors and members of historically marginalized groups in displays to recognize these significant literary contributions outside Pride Month and other celebrations. Please remember to include brief bios so these authors' identities are not erased! Beyond the classics, from science fiction, horror, romance, to mysteries and more, there are also LGBTQ authors in all genres (many of us writing the stories we didn't get to read growing up) that may be

included in Mystery Month, Women in Horror Month, etc. *Hot tip if you have science fiction fans in your school, include new classics on your reading lists like Rivers Solomon's *Unkindness of Ghosts*. Confused about where to start? Visit morediverse.com.

2. *Stick to It:* There are stickers marking mysteries, romance, and other subject classifications in libraries. Rainbow stickers on the spine may seem subtle and wouldn't have to be 'on display' to be easily found, but use caution: some patrons may prefer not having their book selections with visible markers, so consider highlighting in a more subtle way like "Award Winner," "Diverse Book," etc.
3. *Community Resources:* When all the displays are banned, a school group or library can still be a hub for community resources. Invite local branches of PFLAG, GLSEN, and other community groups to drop off materials and newsletters to make available to the public.
4. *Think Outside the Rainbow:* the LGBTQ community is not new, and LGBTQ impact is not limited to the struggle for LGBTQ rights: commemorate Bayard Rustin during African American History Month; Saeed Jones, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Assotto Saint, Chrystos during National Poetry Month; James Baldwin during Banned Books Week; Billie Jean King during women's history month; and others. Don't doubt that LGBTQ activists and authors have impacted history, and seek resources to recognize LGBTQ accomplishments all year. Make these important connections to history that happened outside the rainbow.
5. *Now a Major Motion Picture:* If your school or library hosts a "Read the Movie" book club or event, consider including LGBTQ titles like Reinaldo Arena's *Before Night Falls*, André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name*, Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* and *Carol*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Shamim Sarif's *I Can't Think Straight*, Sarah Waters' *Tipping the Velvet*, Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, and others!
6. *And the Award Goes to...* If your library or school highlights literary award winners with displays or book lists, include Lambda Literary Award winners, too.

Discovering LGBTQ themed books probably won't make anyone 'more queer,' but it just may help patrons and students from feeling alone. Your library shelves, syllabi, and recommended book lists can make all the difference in the world, and here's hoping these six strategies help keep the rainbow visible.

Note

A version of this article appeared online at The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. September 12, 2018. <<https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=15433>>

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